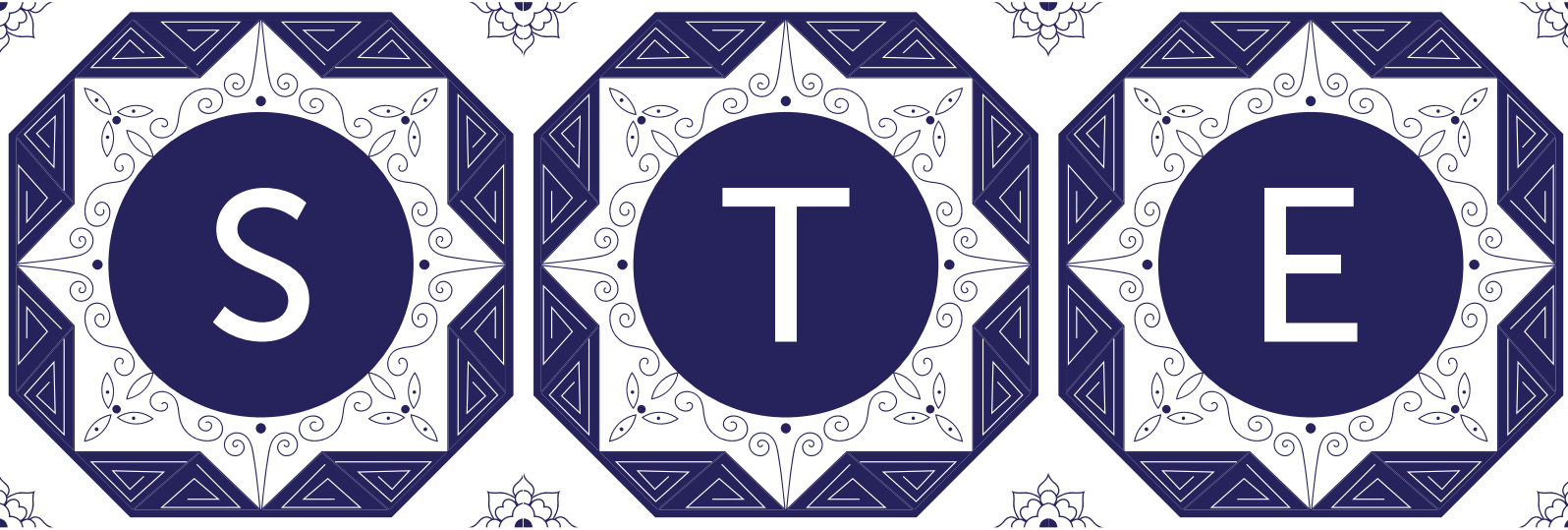


In 50 years of feeding Richmond,
STELLA DIKOS has known
tragedy and triumph



story by EILEEN MELLON • photos by KATE THOMPSON







STELLA DIKOS STANDS AT THE MARBLE COUNTER IN THE kitchen of one of her namesake markets. Silver hairs escape her purple headband. With her time-worn hands she lays a sheet of phyllo dough on the counter. She methodically dips a brush into a small tin of olive oil, brushing the dough until it glistens. A scoop of spinach mixed with fresh dill, mint and feta is placed onto the dough before she folds it into a triangle.

Stella first learned to make spanakopita as a child, in her neighbor's kitchen in Trikala, Greece. Standing on tiptoes, head barely above the counter, she would stare intently with her light blue eyes, just like her mother's. Now, she makes the pastry every Thursday, Friday and Saturday to supply Richmond's three Stella's Grocery markets and her restaurant, Stella's.

At 78 and still on the job, Stella is surely the longest-tenured chef in the city. In the early 1960s, when the young, insecure immigrant from a small village in Greece landed in Richmond at age 19, she was unaware she would star in her own Greek tragedy. But the humble heroine was lifted by a chorus of the community, by a strength she never knew she had, by her growing family and by feeding others. From the bohemian days of The Village to her restaurant and markets, Stella is a Richmond icon.

'A LITTLE SPIDER'

When Stella was 3, her mother, Maria, died during childbirth. To Stella, her passing is a faint memory of black hats and flowers. Maria had lost five children before Stella, who was the first baby to survive. Her brother, Nick, was the second and last.

She grew up in a tense, tiny household, where the grief from her mother's death was suffocating. Her grandmother, Evangelia, a reserved woman from the mountains, moved in to help take care of Stella and her brother. She shared a room with Stella.

Her father and grandmother argued constantly. Stella would

sneak outside and pump water to drown out their jarring shouts, hoping that neighbors would not hear.

"My grandmother was so full of grief, she wouldn't let it go," Stella recalls. Every day, Evangelia would walk to the cemetery and light a floating candle in the tiny lantern on her daughter's grave, a Greek tradition intended to provide the soul with light at night.

Stella's father, Mikhail, a tailor and beekeeper, was a perfectionist with an eye for elegance. He had expectations: for a clean, tidy house, for high-quality food, and for his children. He often stopped at a nearby cafe on the way home, seeking a balm for his grief.

Growing up, he paid for Stella and her brother to take English classes. She knew it was a sign he wanted her to excel, and that he cared, but Stella desperately wanted more. "I know he loved me ... but he never showed it, and that's what hurt me," she says.

While other daughters were pampered by their mothers, Stella walked home directly from school to help her grandmother clean, cook and care for her father's treasured bees.

"I was a person who needed nurturing and affection because I could see it around the neighborhood with other families. ... It was haunting me inside that I didn't have that," she recalls.

It was in those same neighborhood homes that Stella found solace, and where she would learn to cook.

The women would call, "Stellalita!" beckoning her to join them. She would whisk eggs for desserts and bask in their praises: "You're so good for helping your grandmother," they would say. Stella held on to those small moments.

"I felt like a little spider searching for crumbs of affection from them," Stella says, tears streaming down her face.

After she graduated high school, Stella's aunts approached her. A Greek man from her mother's village was searching for >

a wife to bring back to America. Lacking money, a dowry or rosy prospects in Greece, Stella didn't think twice.

Over tea and dessert, Stella met Stavros Dikos. He had thick, dark hair, an olive complexion and was 18 years older. He owned The Village Restaurant in Richmond. Stella saw warmth in his eyes. He asked if she liked America. She said, "Yes, I think I would like America."

Two months later, on March 4, 1962, on an Athens mountain-side, they had a small wedding. Stella was told to keep a serious and dignified face during the ceremony. She wept beforehand — she wished her mother were there.

"I didn't know the person I married, to be honest," she says. "They wouldn't tell us much about marriage or relationships back then." She had never had a boyfriend.

"I didn't know anything," she says. "A man had never even touched me. Everything I learned about relationships or intimacy was from him."

In May 1962, Stella boarded a plane to come to America. She gazed out the window before takeoff and saw her father, tears pouring from his eyes. It was the first time Stella had seen him cry, and it would be almost 10 years before she would see him again.

When she arrived in New York, Stavros was waiting for her, and they drove to Richmond in his Pontiac Star Chief. Stella had been sick on the plane and would soon find out she was pregnant with her first child, Demetrios, born in December that year.

"Because I didn't have a mother, I didn't know if I would be a good mother or do the right things," Stella says. She told herself, as she always had, she would do the best she could.

When she arrived in Richmond, Stella did not receive the warm welcome she had been hoping for. Upon first meeting, Stavros's older sister told Stella she wasn't good enough for him.

"I sometimes wonder what would have been if we didn't have this happen," Stella says. "What kind of relationship would I've

had with [Stavros] — would it be more loving, more understanding? But because of those years that happened, you change as a human being, you withdraw."

The couple had their second child, Katrina, in 1966. Two years later, Stella transitioned from completing paperwork for The Village to hustling in the kitchen every day. She had thought that when she came to America she might attend college, but she found herself in a different school, one that would prove to be her saving grace.

ANOTHER VILLAGE

At the corner of Grace and Harrison streets, The Village Restaurant welcomed Richmond's eccentrics and everyone in between for decades. "It was named The Village because when Stavros opened it [in 1956], he said it reminded him of the village up in the mountains where everyone knew each other and everybody would go there and greet each other," Stella says. "The Village was the best thing to happen to me."

A bohemian stomping ground, it was home to an unorthodox cast of characters. Leather-vested bikers gathered at the marble-tiled bar. Nearby, tie-dyed beatniks passed joints, and poets pondered over Pabst Blue Ribbon. Artists came for the inspiration, students at Richmond Professional Institute, today's Virginia Commonwealth University, chain-smoked, and their professors escaped the conventional world of college. Stella greeted them all with open arms.

"It kind of felt like home, where [Stavros] and Stella were the parents of these misfits," recalls Rita Lawrence, one of Stella's oldest friends and a former employee who began working at The Village in 1973.

Stella enjoyed her parental role. "They accepted me even though I was an immigrant and didn't speak the language perfectly," she explains. "You don't know how happy that made me and how included I felt."

The hungry, homeless and addicted were never turned away. Stella greeted them with thick pieces of her famous bread and a bowl of lentil soup or stew.

Roberta Bray worked in the kitchen with Stella for 20 years, often babysitting Demetrios and Katrina. She was known for her long cigarette holder, her daily specials, her charisma and her Brunswick stew, a recipe used today at Stella's restaurant and markets.

Young Katrina would sit on a milk crate and watch Bray wash dishes and cook. "She taught me how to cook baked chicken," Katrina says. "She was like my grandmother; we didn't have grandparents."

By the age of 8, Katrina would navigate the sea of characters, taking orders with a pen and pad, running the register, stocking Budweisers at the bar, and playing pinball. "I wouldn't trade it for the world. I didn't need a cul de sac," she says. "I am so thankful for growing up there."

Most nights Stella closed the restaurant and wasn't home until 3 a.m. Stavros was beginning to have back problems and would take the children to and from school and work the day shift at The Village.



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—
STELLA DIKOS





(Left) At her arranged wedding to Stavros Dikos, Stella was told to keep a serious face.
(Right) Stella in The Village Restaurant

Every day Stella pumped out orders, a methodical maniac in a little nook inside a packed restaurant. “She was like a machine,” Lawrence says.

Work was all Stella knew — her life a constant stream of responsibilities that began in her tiny village in Greece. “I look back sometimes and say, how the heck did I do it?” she says. Trying to balance being a wife, chef and mother weighed on her.

“I would go to people’s houses and have dinner, and I thought, ‘I never had this, we never had dinner together,’” Katrina recalls.

In 1981, after almost 25 years, the landlord refused to sell the building or offer Stavros and Stella a long-term lease, hindering them from making improvements to the structure. Stella told Stavros it was time to move on. They could become partners with her brother, Nick Kafantaris, who had moved to Richmond in 1970 and owned Joe’s Inn.

In the spring of 1981, the Dikoses sold their business and its name to Mike and Don Fleck. It was renamed The Village Café and moved across the street to its present location.

“You have no idea how many [floral] arrangements we got from customers,” says Stella of The Village’s last day. “They felt it was a funeral. That something was dying.”

It was the end of an era.

WELCOME TO STELLA’S

The Dikoses began a partnership with Nick and his wife, Judy, at Joe’s Inn that same year and soon expanded the restaurant. After three months, however, Stella realized family and finances don’t mix.

“I thought, ‘What have I done? How do I break the news to my husband?’” she says. She knew they had to leave Joe’s Inn. Just seven months in, they exited the partnership.

For the next year Stella worked three jobs. One day, on her way home from work, she took a detour, stopping by the Fan building she and Stavros owned, where Edo’s Squid is today.

As Stella climbed the 26 steps to the top floor of the build-

ing, beams of light flooded through the tall windows. The silhouettes of the buildings outside reminded her of cities in Europe. It was a spiritual moment. She realized she was standing in her restaurant.

“It was like a divine something or energy came over me,” she recalls, her voice loud and filled with nostalgia. “I felt so positive that I would make it. I can’t describe it.”

She told Stavros, “I’m going to cook everything that I learned as a young girl and do the best I can to make it a success,” she says. Stavros blamed her for the failed partnership at Joe’s Inn. She vowed to make it right.

“I didn’t have any hate, but he hurt me,” Stella says. “If I had seen a little bit of understanding or *we’re going to manage, we made the mistake.*” Instead she heard the echoes of her husband’s voice, “you, you, you.”

Her promise to Stavros became her driving force. She told him she would name it Stella’s because everybody knew her.

Six months later, on April 24, 1983, Stavros and Stella opened her namesake restaurant, mere steps away from The Village. It was her moment to shine.

“It was a necessity to open Stella’s,” she says. “I needed to succeed.”

On opening night, patrons packed the narrow staircase, a line spilling onto Harrison Street. Like any great friendship, the time between restaurants was meaningless, the relationship easily rekindled. “No matter where I went, they followed and supported me,” she says.

Inside, the tables were adorned with bright bouquets of misfit flowers that Stella had rescued from the dumpsters behind florist shops while Lawrence stood lookout. Stella ran a tight ship, and servers joked that no matter how much you swept, a pile of dirt and trash would be waiting the next day, a sign that Stella had gone behind you.

The menu at Stella’s started with breads, soups, and a few appetizers and entrees. “Nothing fancy, but consistent plates of good food,” Stella says. Soon she added daily specials, such as Branzino incorporating a sauce she learned from her father.

The restaurant was revolutionary for its time. There were few local restaurants in 1983, and most people considered a steak and potato fine dining — not dolmades, flaming cheese, baklava or rice pudding. Stella used high-quality ingredients, staples including Greek feta and olive oil, and she never cut corners.

“The food at Stella’s rocked Richmond,” Lawrence recalls.

Stella fell into a familiar pattern, working 17-hour days while Stavros spent more time at home because of back problems. “I did what I had to do,” Stella says. “I made a promise I would >



For more facts and photos from the life of Stella Dikos, visit richmondmag.com/stella.

make it up to [him] ... and I did." But Stella never got praise or recognition from her husband, something she had been longing for since she was a child in Greece.

"Those men, coming from where they came from, did not know how to express themselves," she says. "He was a good person and had a good heart, but it was difficult at times, very difficult. But I was grateful I earned the respect of the community."

In 1995, after some poor financial decisions by Stavros over the years, the Dikoses were forced to sell the restaurant. Stella's baby was gone.

A NEW ERA

At age 16, Katrina met Johnny Giavos at his family's restaurant, Athens Tavern. A week later she saw him at church, and after a push from her friend, she asked him to her junior prom. He said yes. Two years later, in 1986, they had a 525-person Greek wedding at Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral.

"I thought that's what I was supposed to do," says Katrina, who admits they were both far too young.

In January 1990, Constantine Giavos, nicknamed Dean, was born. In 1991, following in their families' footsteps, the couple opened Sidewalk Cafe on Main Street in The Fan. Katrina welcomed a crowd of regulars, paid their tabs when they were broke and most nights didn't get home until 4:30 a.m.

"I am [my mother] but in a new age," Katrina says. "I had the same lifestyle as my parents; I never went looking for that."

While Katrina and Johnny were carving out the first piece of their restaurant empire, Stella would watch Dean. He was the light she desperately needed. "I had the best time when Constantine was growing up," Stella says, her eyes shining.

Twice a week they'd visit the Science Museum of Virginia, a place Dean says he always associates with Stella. He would listen to stories from her childhood — how she fished and foraged for fresh herbs on the mountainside with her grandmother and would drop off bread dough in copper tins at the community oven for baking.

Maria Giavos, Stella's second grandchild, named after Stella's mother, was born in 1994.

Despite the grandchildren, Stella never left the kitchen behind, working shifts at Sidewalk Cafe following the closure of Stella's. One day, as she and Dean took their regular walk for carob cookies and juice at the co-op on the corner of Main and Rowland streets, she had a déjà vu moment: The building was for sale.

"I said, 'I think we can open Stella's here,'" Stella recalls. "It'll be good, I'll do well. I said, 'I'm sure of it.'"

Stella and the Giavoses opened Stella's Cafe on Rowland Street in 1998. The cafe initially served coffee, sandwiches and pastries. "We opened for a day, and people were banging on the door. 'Where's the food?'" recalls Katrina, laughing. A few weeks later, "Cafe" was dropped from the name.

Stella soon refocused on the Greek specialties that had built her faithful following. She didn't simply make food, she cultivated it with *meraki* — artistry, passion, love and all her soul.

Katrina designed the cocktail menu. An 8-year-old Dean

would sit on a crate eating Stella's famous grilled cheese sandwich as he watched Stavros butcher meats. A young Maria ran around the restaurant.

But Katrina and Stella, both strong-willed, didn't always see eye to eye — it was Old World versus New World mentality. "It was a struggle," Katrina says.

In 2007, Stavros was diagnosed with spinal stenosis. Stella knew she had to care for her husband, meaning surrendering control of the kitchen or selling the business.

"It's difficult to pass the taste on [to someone else]. They don't know how it's supposed to taste," she says. "It's hard to teach." With her name on the line, she sold the business, which would later become Rowland Fine Dining.

Stavros couldn't walk or care for himself for almost two years. "I took care of him until the very end," Stella says. "A human being to a human being."

"She worked so hard without recognition, and she stayed with him and took care of him to the last breath," Lawrence says. "She was totally devoted to Stavros."

Stella also kept cooking and would work shifts at 3 Monkeys, another restaurant owned by Johnny and Katrina, with a handful of her specialties on the menu.

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

In 2010 Stella drove down Lafayette Street, a few blocks away from her home, and saw a For Sale sign. At 70, Stella went into business with Katrina and Johnny again. Stavros died on June 15, 2011, two weeks before Stella's opened.

The third incarnation of Stella's restaurant was an instant success with patrons. But behind the scenes, things were tense. Stella was reluctant to ease up on the reins, as both a restaurateur and a mother, while Katrina was trying to assert her role running the restaurant and carrying on her mother's legacy. After three years in business, Katrina asked her mom for a sit-down.

"This is my intervention with you. I love you and respect you, and it's time you do the same for me," Katrina recalls saying, her voice beginning to crack. "I work hard, and I will carry your name forever."

Katrina says she never heard the praise she desired from her mother. Stella was unsure of how to express those feelings because she had never heard the words herself. After the conversation, their relationship changed completely. For Katrina it was freeing, and for her mother it was eye-opening.

In 2015, the trio opened Stella's Grocery across the street from Stella's restaurant. Today, Stella cooks in the market's kitchen three days a week. Two more Stella's Grocery stores opened in Richmond last year, and the family opened a Stella's restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina in 2017. By 2020 the Giavoses hope to publish a cookbook including the story of Stella's life. They also have plans to sell Stella-brand products in specialty grocers across the country.

FULL CIRCLE

For 55 years, Stella has lived in the same brick house. A rose bush that she planted when she and Stavros first moved in >

<STELLA |

is still alive today. At the front door a clay plaque, a gift from her granddaughter, reads, "Yia Yia and Papou's House."

She lives with her son, Demetrios, who works in real estate and moved back in following the death of Stavros. Every Monday Stella teaches Greek to a group of 6- and 7-year olds at Saints Constantine and Helen. She has weekly lunches with friends, visits thrift stores, reads and, when she doesn't know a word, reaches for her dictionary. In May, she plans to visit Greece and the village of her youth, which she typically does every couple years. She is looking forward to teaching Maria the Orthodox tradition of painting red-dyed eggs during Easter — a craft she learned from the women in her village.

"She's been able to live her life more, and I love that," says Dean, who adds that his grandmother is tough and taught him attention to detail. "It makes me happy she can travel and have a chance to breathe and see her great-granddaughter and live the life she's wanted to live."

"There was something about my mother — she had a language barrier, didn't know anyone, lost her mother," says Katrina. "I don't know how she had the class and elegance that she had. I'm so thankful for that, and her teaching me morals."

Kendra Feather, a successful Richmond restaurateur with four businesses, began her journey as business owner at Ipanema Cafe, a fellow Grace Street eatery, in 1998. When Feather hears the name Stella, she says, "Immediately I picture her in the kitchen and

baking really great bread."

But it's Stella's longevity and roots in the dining community, and her strength and positivity as a female business owner, that have inspired Feather.

"To me, it seems like she's figured it out — the job she wants to go to every day that makes her happy — and she does it really well," Feather says. "To be a good boss and mom is really challenging, and she has succeeded on all levels. It's been stunning that they've been able to do what they do and be so kind and successful."

As Stella sits on a bench near the front window of Stella's Grocery in January, surprise snow flurries fall, giving Lafayette Street a quaint cover. She smiles and greets each customer. A restaurant employee enters, and Stella asks about her day. When the employee leaves, she exclaims, "Bye, Yia Yia." A cook at the market waves goodbye, and Stella says, "Have a good day, I love you." An older gentleman, who turns out to be her surgeon, walks in, and they exchange hugs. "Hold on," she says to him and gifts him a new spread they're offering at the market.

"I'm very lucky that I was strong, and I wasn't aware that I was," Stella says. "I pulled through. There were times I thought I would lose my mind, but I pushed and pushed and got up every morning. The years were tough, but I went through with dignity and took care of my family. I worked hard and got the respect of the community, and for that I'm grateful." ■



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